DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 742 CG 017 870

AUTHOR Strack, Fritz; And Others
TITLE The Bad Effects of the Good Old Days: Time Perspective, Hedonic Quality and Judgements of Subjective Well-Being.
SPONS AGENCY Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn - Bad Godesberg (West Germany).
PUB DATE May 84
GRANT Schw-278/2
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (Tilburg, The Netherlands, May 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Etiology; Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluative Thinking; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Life Satisfaction; Recall (Psychology); *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Time Perspective; *Well Being
IDENTIFIERS Happiness; Life Events; West Germany

ABSTRACT

Comparison processes play an important role in any kind of judgment, including judgments about one's well-being. To find out how information about one's own life influences judgments of well-being, two experiments were conducted with a sample of 52 students. It was hypothesized that spatial, temporal, and social distance would influence judgments. Students were asked to list three positive and three negative present or past life events. Most events involved academic achievement or interpersonal relationships. Analysis of results indicated that subjects described themselves as happier and more satisfied if the activated events were positive in the present condition or negative in the past condition. The findings confirmed that life events are more likely to be used as comparison standards if they are temporarily distanced from the past life condition. A second experiment examined the effect of the way in which people think about life events. Subjects were asked to recall only one event, detailing precisely how the event developed, or why it occurred. Results showed that in the how condition, subjects were happier if they had to describe a positive event, while in the why condition they felt happier if the event was negative. These findings suggest that events that are vividly and concretely imagined (the how condition) influence subjective well being in the direction of their hedonic quality. (JAC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED251742

The Bad Effects of the Good Old Days: Time Perspective, Hedonic Quality and Judgements of Subjective Well-Being.

Fritz Strack
University of Mannheim

Norbert Schwarz
University of Heidelberg

Elisabeth Gschneidinger
University of Heidelberg

Paper presented at the meeting of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology in Tilburg, The Netherlands, May 1984.
The reported research was supported by grant Schw 278/2 from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft to Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack. Correspondence should be addressed to: Dr. Fritz Strack, Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaften, Universität Mannheim, D-6800 Mannheim 1, W. Germany.

CG 017870

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Norbert Schwarz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In doing research on psychological conceptions of well-being, one has to be aware that psychologists are not the only ones who claim expertise in this domain. Notions about happiness and satisfaction, as well as recipes of how one may attain these desirable states are abundantly available in literature, philosophy, and in different variants of everyday knowledge, such as proverbs.

This abundance of know-how in the area of happiness, however, does not make psychological research redundant. The notions one finds in the literature, in proverbs, and even in philosophy are often contradictory. And, as long as empirical data are accepted as arguments, social psychologists are justified in trying to make sense of these contradictions or incongruencies through experiments.

Let me start out with a common belief about the greatest happiness. It is one of happiness as a never-ending state. Call it utopia in this life or paradise in the next, it is always the desire that happiness is not just a momentary matter but something that lasts forever.

But, as everyone knows, there are no states of eternal happiness and there is even reason to believe that ever lasting happiness is not heaven on earth. Quite the contrary. George Bernard Shaw noted that a holiday without end is an apt and generally comprehensible definition of hell. Happiness needs contrast.

Shaw's doubts make a lot of sense for psychologists who regard happiness and satisfaction as special cases of general judgemental processes. The reason is that for <u>any</u> kind of judgement, comparison processes play an important role, and this is also true, of course, for judgements about one's own well-being.

In the research I am going to present, we were interested in finding out how information about one's own life influences judgements of well-being. The aim was to discover how events in an individual's life affected their happiness and satisfaction. And, as you'll see, the answer is not easy - but interesting.

Generally speaking, life events can be separated into two classes: positive and negative. Positive events, events with positive valence, or positive hedonic value are strived for and negative events are avoided. And, of course, the hedonic quality of events influences an individual's subjective well-being. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that one's own well-being is a positive function of the frequency of positive events and a negative function of the frequency of negative experiences. Thus the more positive things one encounters, the happier and more satisfied one feels; the more negative events one is exposed to, the more unhappy and dissatisfied one feels.

The relationship, however, between the hedonic quality of life-events, on the one hand, and life satisfaction on the other, isn't quite as straightforward as it first appears. Research on so-called "critical life events" or life crises show that such events cannot solely be regarded as a danger for the people experiencing them. Rather, as Sigrun-Heide Filipp (1982), a German life-event researcher puts it, such events contain at the same time the chances for self-actualization and personality development. In America, Elder (1974) found that boys who had been particularly hard hit by the world economic crisis assessed their adult years much more positively than one would have expected on the basis of their objective situation. Filipp (1982) assumes that, and I quote, "the experience of negative childhood events had apparently created a baseline that rendered all subsequent events as more positive experiences" (p. 777).

"Deprivation is the precondition of any pleasure" says Schopenhauer, and this would be the corresponding philosophical notion. As Schopenhauer goes on to say "Satisfaction or happiness can, therefore, never be more than relief from pain and distress (poverty)". And, in the words of Kant, "Each pleasure must be preceded by pain. Pain is always first."

These philosophical statements seem to suggest an inverse relationship between the hedonic quality of events and subjective well-being. Negative experiences would accordingly increase happiness and satisfaction. The more misfortune one is exposed to the greater the chances for happiness. This position, however, can't be defended in its consequences since there are so many happy situations that do not require any preceding deprivation.

It is obvious, however, that both theories about the relationship between event quality and happiness are true for at least some experiences. The question which therefore arises is under which antecedent conditions is there a negative and under which circumstances a positive relationship between these two variables. In other words, when does the hedonic quality of an event lead to parallel effects on well-being and when to contrast effects.

We contend that is is one condition that above all leads to contrast effects on judgements of well-being, namely distance. It is not only distance on the dimension of judgement, as assimilation-contrast theory postulates; it is also the distance on the spatial, temporal and social dimension.

An event with sufficient spatial distance will be more likely to become an anchor in judgements of well-being than a spatially close event. "When down in Turkey, far away, the foreign people are a-fighting ...", this thought will heighten (or at least did so in Goethe's times) the bourgeois comfort.

The same event in close proximity causes quite different reactions. If the windows and doors are tightly locked, then the snowstorm in front of the house is sufficiently far apart to increase one's feelings of cosiness.

Secondly, it is social distance that leads to contrast effects. A misfortune happening to a stranger may be more likely to increase the awareness that I am comparatively better off, than the same misfortune suffered by a close friend, relative, or partner. The formation of a unit relationship between two persons, namely the reduction of social distance, prevents contrast (cf. Heider, 1958).

Finally, and this is the topic of the first experiment, it is the temporal distance which promotes contrast effects. Past distress may increase our present happiness; events which have occurred with sufficient temporal distance from the present are likely to be used as comparison points for judgements of present well-being. A negative event, however, that took place only recently and therefore belongs to the phenomenal present may influence our well-being in the sense of that event's hedonic value.

By the same token, it also follows from a general theory of judgement that past positive events diminish subsequent well-being. If it is true that past events are used as standards of comparison to assess present well-being, then a negative discrepancy between the present and past state should also lead to contrast effects.

If one attempts to test the predicted interaction between time perspectives (past vs. present) and the hedonic quality of life-events (positive vs. negative) in an experiment, the problem arises of directly manipulating such events, particularly the past ones.

Therefore, and because we believe that the information used for judgements are the ones most easily retrieved from memory, we have instead varied the cognitive accessability of information about life events. To that end we had subjects think about positive or negative events of their life, events that had happened either in the present or in the past of the individual. We expected that the two factors would affect the subject's well-being interactively. If present life events are activated, their hedonic quality should influence ratings of happiness and satisfaction in the same direction. Activating past events, on the other hand, should induce the subjects to evaluate their present well-being in contrast to their hedonic quality.

Method

Fifty-two students were asked to help the experimenter with constructing a questionnaire to assess life events. The construction of this inventory, it was pointed out would first require the collection of a large number of positive and negative life events. A subsequent analysis would then determine which of these events would become part of the final questionnaire. Ostensibly, there already existed several general questions for life evaluation which the subjects were asked to answer afterwards. These questions had different rating scales, and the subjects were told that it was intended to find out which type of scale is the best.

With the ostensible purpose of collecting as many events as possible, subjects in the present condition were asked to think about their present life and to write down three particularly positive and pleasant or three particularly negative and unpleasant events. Similarly, subjects in the past condition were asked to do the same vis-a-vis past events.

The majority of the events (both positive and negative) had to do with academic achievement and relationships (with friends, parents etc.).

The dependent variables were two principle measures of subjective well-being in the order of "happiness" and "satisfaction". The first question was worded: "If you think about your life, how happy are you with your life as a whole?" Endpoints were labeled "happy" and "unhappy". The subsequent question was phrased "And, in general, how satisfied are you with your life?" Endpoints: "satisfied", "unsatisfied".

Results and Discussion

Here is the experimental design with the factors "time perspective" (present vs. past) and "hedonic quality of life event" (positive vs. negative). As I said, an interaction between these factors was expected.

Here is the first dependent variable "happiness" (Table 1). The greater the number, the more positive the rating. It can be clearly seen that the subjects in the present condition described themselves as happier if the activated events were positive rather than negative. This pattern reverses in the past condition. Here, subjects felt happier if they had been thinking about negative events rather than if they had to generate positive past events.

The ratings of "satisfaction" (Table 2) mirror this pattern. Subjects were more satisfied if they had activated positive events of the present. For the past events there is again a contrast effect: Subjects felt more satisfied if the generated events were negative than if they were positive.

It is interesting to note that there were no main effects for both dependent variables. That means no gross differences between positive and negative events.

These results clearly confirm our prediction. They demonstrate that the temporal distance does indeed determine in which direction the hedonic quality of an event influences judgements of subjective well-being. The findings suggest that events are more likely to be used as comparison standards if they are temporarily distanced from the present life situation.

Experiment II

This, however, is not yet the end of the story. Of course, we all know that thinking about past events does not always affect our present well-being in the opposite sense. Reminiscing about the "good old days" may even increase one's present well-being. And, the apparent success of the nostalgia wave is only understandable if one assumes that thinking back somehow generates a positive state. Experiences of this kind obviously contradict our experimental findings. The question arises: "When does thinking about the past generate contrast and when does it not?" It was our guess - and the hypothesis of the second experiment - that the answer must be found in the way in which people think about past events. To be precise, we suspected that past events would not lead to contrast effects if one thinks about them in a concrete, vivid, or visual way. Contrast effects, on the other hand, should become more likely if the thinking is abstract, pallid, or propositional.

This notion rests on the assumption that visual representations trigger moods or emotions and vividly thinking about positive or negative events generates positive or negative moods. One's own

mood, however, provides important information for judgements of subjective well-being, as Norbert Schwarz and Jerry Clore have recently (1983) demonstrated. Therefore, a concrete representation of an event does not only activate information about the event, but also moods congruent with the event's hedonic quality. This is the opposite of abstract thinking which does not activate moods but only the potential for comparison of information.

From these considerations the experimental design to test the hypothesis follows immediately: a two-factor design with the independent variables "hedonic quality of the event" - as before - and "mode of thinking", either abstract or concrete. The dependent variables were the same as in the first study. The only question that remained was how one could experimentally induce the two different modes of thinking. We settled for a method which is based on an idea by Bower, Black and Turner (1979) which I once used in a different context (Strack, 1983). Bower, Black and Turner argue that stories are hierarchically structured and that one can move up and down the hierarchical levels by asking either "why" or "how" questions. Why questions lead to the more abstract relationships like causes, motives, and reasons, whereas how questions ask for the more concrete aspects of the story, like means and execution.

The results of my previous study suggested that the answers to those questions result in different representations of an event. Subjects who were asked to describe how a social event came about, were more likely to visualize the event than subjects who had to explain why the event occurred.

Applied to our present problem, this means that participants who are asked to write down <u>how</u> an event in their life developed would vividly think about the event. Subsequent ratings of their well-being would be influenced in the direction of the hedonic quality of the events. In contrast, subjects who write down <u>why</u>

the event occurred should think about the event in a more abstract and analytical way. In these conditions, the event would be more likely to become a standard of comparison to evaluate the present situation.

Here is the design with the two factors. The procedure of the experiment was essentially the same as before. However, it was only one event which had to be written down precisely and in detail in the "how" condition, whereas in the other condition subjects were asked to write different accounts as to why the event happened.

Results and Discussion

Here are the results. Again, the first dependent variable was "happiness" (Table 3). We recognize our familiar interaction. In the how-condition, subjects were happier if they had to describe a positive event. Under the why-condition, they felt happier if the event was negative. The pattern is similar for "satisfaction" (Table 4). The contrast in the why-condition is somewhat weaker. For this variable we also get a main effect for the type of description in addition to the interaction. And, finally, as a third dependent variable we have "mood" (Table 5). Subjects were asked "If you answered spontaneously: How do you feel at this moment?" This involved a seven-point scale with the endpoints "good" and "bad". Here again, the interaction results almost exclusively from the how-condition. This corresponds with our earlier assumption that concrete thinking affects mood. Abstract thinking in the why-condition, on the other hand, does not obviously affect the subjects' mood.

These findings suggest that it is, in fact, the way of thinking about life events which determines their influence on subjective well-being. And this seems to apply particularly to negative events. Experiences from clinical practice seem to confirm this result. Moreoever, findings from vividness research in social psychology are in agreement with the present results which suggest that concrete images of events influence mood and well-being. And these may be used as information for judgements and decisions. "I have a good feeling if I am doing this" is the everyday description of this process. Visceral knowledge, so to speak.

What can our findings contribute to a better understanding of happiness and satisfaction? First of all, judgements of well-being do seem to be subject to contrast effects, but not in the radical version put forward by philosophers. Happiness does not need contrast, but contrast needs distance. And the present results demonstrate that temporal distance furthers contrast effects. There seems to be a second requirement for such contrast effects; namely a specific mode of information processing, in which more abstract reflective ways of thinking become important.

Events, on the other hand, that are vividly and concretely imagined, influence subjective well-being in the direction of their hedonic quality. Most probably because they trigger moods and emotions which in turn become salient bases of judgement. Or, more speculatively, because the distance of an event is clearly decreased if it appears vividly and concretely in our mind's eye.

References

Bower, G.H., Black, J. & Turner, T. Scripts in text comprehension and memory. Cognitive Psychology, 1979, 11, 177-220.

Elder, G.H. Children of the great depression. Chicago, 1974.

Filipp, S.H. Kritische Lebensereignisse als Brennpunkte einer Angewandten Entwicklungspsychologie des mittleren und höheren Erwachsenenalters. In R. Oerter und L. Montada (Hrsg.), Entwicklungspsychologie. München: Urban & Schwarzenberg, 1982.

Heider, F. The psychology of interpersonal relationships. New York: Wiley, 1958.

Kant, I. Das Gefühl der Lust und Unlust. In Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht abgefaßt, I, 2. Königsberg 1798.

Schopenhauer, A. Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung. Erster Band. § 58. Cited from the Diogenes-Edition, München, 1977.

Schwarz, N. & Clore, G. Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1983, 45, 513-523.

Strack, F. Experimentelle Untersuchungen zum Einfluß bildhafter Vorstellungen auf die subjektive Wahrscheinlichkeit sozialer Ereignisse. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Mannheim University, 1983.

Table 1

Experiment 1: Dependent variable "happiness"

Time perspective	Hedonic quality of the event	
	positive	negative
present	8.15	5.92
past	6.23	7.23

F (1,48) = 8,4; $p < .006$

1: unhappy
11: happy

Table 2

Experiment 1: Dependent variable "satisfaction"

Time perspective	Hedonic quality of the event	
	positive	negative
present	7.85	6.31
past	6.85	7.77

F (1,49) = 6,1; $p <$ .02

1: unsatisfied
11: satisfied

Table 3

Experiment 2: Dependent variable "happiness"

Type of description	Hedonic quality of the event	
	positive	negative
"How?"	7.31	5.87
"Why?"	6.62	8.12

F (1,60) = 6,9; p = .01

1: unhappy
11: happy

Table 4

Experiment 2: Dependent variable "satisfaction"

Type of description	Hedonic quality of the event	
	positive	negative
"How?"	7.06	4.69
"Why?"	7.00	7.62

F (1,60) = 6,4; p = .01

1: unsatisfied
11: satisfied

Table 5

Experiment 2: Dependent variable "mood"

Type of description	Hedonic quality of the event	
	positive	negative
"How?"	4.80	3.56
"Why?"	4.25	4.69

F (1,59) = 4,8; p = .03

1: bad
7: good